If you need to, keep time on me

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by Zigzagwanderer

Summary

Prompt from my dear friend; after Hannibal left Will in the desert, post-Fall, we know that Will was making up his mind about following Hannibal to Vakkrehejm, their little white house on an island in an archipelago in the chilly Baltic Sea.
(see 'Love is a journey, not a destination' series). But what did Hannibal do while he was there without Will?

Chapter 1

There is much to do.

The property maintenance company from the mainland have serviced the little white house adequately, of course.

But it is still in need of attention, of art.

And there are also the adaptions necessary to the security of the island. To refer to these as armouring would be to descend into melodrama, but nonetheless, some accommodations must be made.

Hannibal intends to sleep soundly on Vakkrehejm, once the conditions for such repose have been met.

His eyes, unclosing, betraying, lie upon the vacant pillow next to his, and he is angry, and he arrests the action as soon as he is aware of it; for his own armour has long ago become an art.

Hannibal turns, resolutely, onto his other side.

The price of such pride is pain.

It is so striking in its purity, this flare of phosphorus, that as he twists his body over, it stabs the midnight room through with white, and for one blinding moment, Hannibal mistakes his own agony for lightning.

He breathes deeply, and does not pray Will's name aloud.

He breathes deeply, and lets the flicker and fork of it serve as a reminder to arrange the clearing of the neglected gardens for the following week, when he will be at the mercy of a private clinic.

Hannibal breathes deeply, and imagines strangers, rummaging around in the miry overgrowth, hacking out the deadwood.
He trusts that their knives will be sharp enough. Their hands steady.
He must ask them to be sure that they remove and destroy anything which is sickly, cankered, or malformed.

He closes his eyes. Sweats.

Monstrosity is merely anomalous creation; thus Hannibal has always been a different thing, above the mundanity of the petty gods, above the self-righteous divinity of man.

But now, eccentricity is no longer his ally, and these errant, aberrant cells offer only abasement.

The clock on the tallboy ticks. The recalcitrant spigot drips, downstairs.

After a while, Hannibal stops fighting what cannot be fought.

He returns to his accustomed position.

He turns, and bends his knee.

He surrenders his arm out across the limitless, linen desert, and his fingertips search, restlessly, on the empty side of the bed.

And Hannibal says his own, private prayer aloud.

And he says it blindly, and into the dark.

Chapter 2

Hannibal is scolded, sincerely.

The cookies were meant only for the convalescent.

And yet, in the end, after a sparse, unspectacular supper, the two of them sit outside, with the serving plate between them, the garden before them.
It has been crumbled down to a granular, cocoa dust. It is waiting for the tempering of winter, and then, the far-off sugaring of spring.

They eat in an attentive silence. The cardamom compliments the coppering sun; lacking in true spice, it still has a mild warmth that comforts, and does not scorch the senses.
Hannibal eats, and is silent. He has not yet recovered his taste for fire.

They walk to the beach.
Hannibal is slower on the way back. He is tired, he is stitched, and every step tugs him into the present; sometimes, now, he finds that he glances across, instead of looking back.

His hand is pressed to his side. He has an absence within; a soreness, an ache.
But he has survived. He is able to live. To sip lemon tea.

Hannibal stumbles, and so he looks down. He is unused to the undulations of both the island and the endless water that surrounds it, and so he looks down, and he also looks outward, at the changing colours of the light on the changing, colourless seas.

And again and again, instead of looking back, and back, and back, he glances across.

At Daniel, beside him, who is as pale and clean as bone.

The policeman's limbs are long-muscled; he and Hannibal would run well together.
The policeman's limbs are well-balanced; they would provide, Hannibal thinks, a pleasing leverage.

Naked, and sheened, and stretched, Hannibal thinks that the gold and white of them would be beautiful, yet in every other circumstance, Daniel is awkward, stiff of gait; he is a palomino that has hobbled himself.

There was, no doubt, a younger, rounder, comelier sibling, that was born, and ever after made its brother unsure, and stunted.
Instead of bringing joy, and a burden of irreplaceable adoration.

Hannibal struggles for breath.
They return to the half-empty house.

Briefly, for it is late, they talk of the coldness and the closing down which is to come. They are matter-of-fact about the terror of it, the isolating months and the scathing, bitter, northern

seasoning which will soon fall upon them.

They share an ancestry, their flesh is of old Europe, old snow, and they have the down of dead pine forests at jaw and groin and crown.

Daniel stands in the kitchen. His uniform hat is wrung out in his long, white hands.
"Well. You must rest, and I have to return to the office. Thank you for your hospitality, once again, Mr Buckley."

Hannibal nods. "Eirik, please. And it is I that should thank you. For your continuing courtesy to an incomer such as myself. You are an excellent ambassador for your archipelago, Inspector Linna."

Daniel nods back. His eyes are pale. Unsure.

His skin is milk; the red that floods it is painful, it is the flush that should come from being struck, not from being complimented.

Hannibal thinks about breaking such ground; how it could be planted to yield more red roses.

How he could easily, so easily, thumb violets from its surface.
How he could bring forth such bloody little buds.

And then, as they watch each other in the house, half of which remains absent, and empty, they hear the plashing of tap-water into the sink.

"A faulty washer?" Daniel swallows, and turns towards the leaking tap. "I should officially inform you of our policy on conservation of resources."
He attempts a dry laugh, helpless in the powdering, cinnamon evening. "I should, by rights, give you a ticket."

But Hannibal is listening to the dripping of the water.
He had forgotten it, since coming back from the clinic.

He looks out of the back door. At the waiting garden.

And a ghost grumbles into the kitchen, clods falling from muddy boots. It curses the digging, rubs its back, curses at the tap, curses at the domestic chores that it, nonetheless, has chosen.

It goes back out to the palatial workshop, to fetch tools.

It curses, but the ghost is smiling. It curses, but the ghost has chosen.

Hannibal blinks.

"Do you have a wrench?" Daniel asks. "I would be more than happy to…"

"No." Hannibal says. He blinks again.

"I am afraid not," he amends. "I am, in fact, waiting for someone to come and fix it."

And he presses his hand to his side. He is unable to entertain absences. He has always been more complete, when full of ghosts.

“They have not come yet,” Hannibal says, and he looks back, and back, and back. “But maybe they will come tomorrow.”

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

(sorry for the delay-I just had to include Torre, Will's new islet.)

It is a fierce month; summer claws into Sarvia; it does not want to leave.

Under the head-aching, hostile cloudlessness, the contractors are endlessly disobliging.

They stink. They make sounds when they should be silent. Their jarring limbs flail about, when all that is wanted is grace.

The trees out west on Torre shimmer. The rocks on the shoreline are crusted with white salt lichens.

Hannibal stares at the contractors' anonymous vessel, and at two men it belongs to.

He puts his hand over his surgical wound. It is no longer burning; it will soon winter away. It will soon be as faded as the discontented sun.

The apish one takes all hospitality offered as tribute. He boasts of his nefarious accomplishments; they are bunker-builders to the angels of the underworld, the warlord and the celebrated criminal, to those whose haloes glitter but do not shine.

He accepts readily that his own idols are Eirik Buckley's bogeymen.
That fear of these new gods, in their Reaper's tailoring, or their military jackets, is reason enough to acquire a refrigerated cellar, hidden compartments, and a concealed passageway that has been slipped in between the walls.

The other one, the more furtive one of the pair, is different. He is rummaging, rummaging, all the time, seeking crumbs.
His is a disgraced intelligence; perhaps he was an architect, perhaps he cut one too many corners off the plans for a school or a hospital.

Bitterness being more dangerous than bravado, Hannibal lets the rat see only that he is bled-out, that he is buried alive in his bolt-hole, and there is such a dismaying truth to this disguise, that the rat stops watching, and grows comfortable, and asks, unapologetically, for whiskey to be added to his after-dinner coffee.

It is understood by all that theirs is not to be a lasting friendship.

After a week, the mercenary carpenters finish.
The work is satisfactory. Untraceable. For cash.

They smirk for one last time at the little white house, at its bookcases and crockery and at the clearly masculine, clearly double bedroom.

Hannibal hears their crude satire as he stands in the kitchen. Looking out of the window at the straits.

His hand is on the dripping tap. He takes his medicine and he takes his morphine, and he rocks forwards on his toes, on the edge of his own inertia. Over and again.

Sweet Sandy stays in the garden. Away from both rat and ape.

He is nervous, but he is none the worse for his expedited quarantine. He accepts that Hannibal's separation from him, along with any, and all decisions which Hannibal makes on his behalf, are undoubtedly for the best.

He does not punish Hannibal, by his actions, for deeds which he has, based on the evidence of other actions, already forgiven.

And the short, yellow fur on his head is warm, and consolatory to the touch.

So, the contractors count their money, and chew on Hannibal's bread for the last time.
They begin to tidy away their tools.

The police motor launch approaches the jetty.
It settles, cosily, behind the contractors' boat, and both men move to stand on either side of the glass doors in the dining room.
They pull out their weaponry; it is thoughtful of them to reveal where they hide their guns and knives.

Hannibal calmly explains that it is a personal visit.
And he walks, without haste, towards Inspector Linna.

"Mr Buckley. I saw that you had visitors."
"A few repairs needed to be undertaken."

Hannibal remains on the steps. He is in Linna's way, but politely so. Spots of light irritate him, reflecting off all those shiny buttons.

“The workmen will be leaving shortly.”
“Men?” The policeman glances towards the windows of the little white house.
Hannibal wonders what he expects to see.

“I am of little use, currently, as a hod-carrier,” he explains, flatly.
Then he smiles, but conceals the sudden, leaping cruelty of it. “I had need of young, strong arms. Skilled hands.”

There is a pause. Linna sweats, constrained. “Of course.”

The time for invitation passes.

In the end, the policeman resorts to an enquiry after Hannibal’s health. And Hannibal answers. Politely. Without haste.

Daniel’s hair and eyes are tongued red by the sun; it too is desperate, clawing itself bloody as is it forced to yield at last.

“I must excuse myself,” Hannibal inclines his head. “These labourers take such liberties. Especially in this unseasonable heat. I find that they must be watched, constantly, or else they simply disrobe and start drinking beer.”

He hears the ignition of the launch misfire then fire as he reaches the back door to the kitchen.

Inside, it is cold. He takes a breath.

From somewhere on the ground floor, there is a sudden, sharp noise of pain.
Sandy skids on the tiles as he pushes past Hannibal.
He outruns his own sense of balance and tumbles down the steps in his haste to be outside.
Hannibal sees the yellow of his back spangle like a beam between the sauna and the smokehouse.

Hannibal blinks.

He hears laughter.

He gets down a glass and fills it from the tap. He takes his medicine.

He pours his morphine down the sink.

He turns off the tap. The water stops.
It stops.
It does not drip.
It stops.

Hannibal looks out the window, at the straits; Linna is reversing the police launch.
Sandy is down, flat and panting, in the grass.

Hannibal goes into the living room.

“You fixed the tap,” he says, without preamble, to the ape. “Yet that repair was not included in your instructions.”
“Yeah. I did. Fucking drip, drip, drip, drove me fucking mad.” The ape grins. “No charge, mister.”

Hannibal picks up the tuning fork. He decides that enough dust has gathered upon the neglected piano. He will set aside the afternoon for composition. He spins the implement around in his hand so that the twin tines rest in his palm.

“And you,” he tells the rat. “You hurt the dog.”
“That was an accident,” the thin one is smiling too. He has a cigar in his mouth. Hannibal can smell a faint singed scent that is not tobacco.
“Damn thing came in and got underfoot.” He points the glowing end at Hannibal. “Maybe you should have trained him better.”

Before the long arms can reach him, Hannibal has, quite simply, stabbed the ape to death. Eyes put out first, with the handle of the tuning fork, then brisk, hard punctures to the chest.

Hannibal turns.
The rat has started to run.
Hannibal takes him by the throat as he scrabbles by, and crushes the cartilage in his hand. With the tuning fork, he nicks out the rat’s tendons.

Then he lets go. The rat, squealing hoarsely, squirms out of the door.

Hannibal avoids the falling, coughing, apish bulk and pushes it backwards onto the tarpaulin that has yet to be cleared away from the alterations. The blood sunsets quietly on the sheeting, overseen by the piano.

Hannibal folds up his bloodied cuffs. Wipes his face clean as he walks outside.

Inspector Linna is steering around the top of the island.
Hannibal waves to him as he crosses the lawn. Inspector Linna waves back.

The sun is surrendering. It is like the best kind of fur, yellow and warm.

The rat is crouching, limping, crawling through the summer weeds. Eventually he trips right over Sandy, who is motionless and hiding in the deepest, softest part of the meadow.

Hannibal continues to wave, and walk, until he wades across the crisp, dry ocean and finds the drowning rat by its feeble whimpering.

He reaches down and strangles the contractor over long, heated minutes.

Then he checks on Sandy.

There does not appear to be lasting damage; salve to the scorched area should suffice. Fresh liver in the diet for both of them, to aid the healing process.

Hannibal coaxes the yellow dog back into the house.
He washes his hands. He is inspired.

It is much later when he closes the lid of the piano and cleans up.

The contractors are disobliging. They stink. They make sounds when they should be silent. They flail, when they should show grace.
Hannibal loads the bodies onto their vessel.

Torre rises, grey in the blue, over to the west.

And Hannibal cannot help but look past the islets, to the opening mouth of the chilly Baltic sea itself.

The day has been fierce, but summer cannot win.
Winter will come, and it will close the archipelago down.

And then, there will be no way to move through the icy straits.

Even if one could navigate the crowded, commercial Skaggerack, could sail through the Great Belt.

Soon there will be no way for such a traveller to reach Vakkrehejm, to reach home.

Even if one had finally decided, at last, to try.

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